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The Square of Communication

The Anatomy of a Message (or: whenever you say something...)

The basic process of interpersonal communication can be described quickly. There is a *transmitter* who wants to communicate something. He encodes his concerns in recognizable symbols - what he sends out, we call his *message*. It is up to the *receiver* to decode this perceptible construction. Usually, the outgoing and the incoming message correspond well enough so that there is an understanding. Oftentimes, transmitters and receivers choose the option of double-checking the quality of the understanding: through the receiver's *feedback* on how he has decoded the message, how he has received it and what it has evoked in him, the transmitter is partially able to check if what he has intended with his transmission is in accordance with the received result.



Figure 1: Example of an every-day-message: The wife is driving the car, the Husband (passenger) is the transmitter of the message (Drawing by Dagmar Kumbier)

Let's take a closer look at the „message“. It was a fascinating discovery for me (and it took me a while to fully realize its impact), *that one single message always contains a variety of different information*. This is a basic fact of life, and for us, being transmitters and receivers, there is no way around it. The fact that every message comes as a whole package with lots of information is what makes the process of interpersonal communication so difficult and prone to complications - and yet, so very thrilling and exciting. To organize the multitude of information that is included in a message, I would like to differentiate between four "mentally meaningful" aspects of it. An example from every-day-life (see figure 1):

The husband (= sender) tells his wife (= receiver) who is behind the steering wheel: "The light is green!" - What all is contained in this message, what did the transmitter put in it (consciously or unconsciously), and what can the receiver gather from it?

Objective Content (or: the information I give out)

First, the message contains objective information. In this example, we learn about the present state of the traffic light - it is "green". Whenever it is the facts that count, this aspect of the message is in the foreground - or at least, it should be.

At this very moment, too, I am conveying a lot of objective information in this chapter to my readers. You are learning about the fundamentals of communication psychology. - Nevertheless, this is only a part of what is transpiring right now between myself (the transmitter) and you (the receivers). Thus, let us turn to the second aspect of the message:

Self-Disclosure (or: what I give away about myself)

Every message not only contains objective information about the facts but also information about the transmitter himself, as a person. From the example in figure 1, we can draw the conclusion that the transmitter apparently speaks English, that he is generally awake and internally involved in the situation. On top of that, he might be in a hurry, etc. Generally speaking: in every message, we find a piece of self-disclosure on behalf of the transmitter. I choose the term "self-disclosure" to include both the intentional *self-presentation* and the involuntary *self-revelation*. This side of the message is highly charged psychologically, as we will see.

You, too, while reading this right now, are not only learning about objective facts, but also quite a bit about myself, Schulz von Thun, the author. About my way of developing ideas, of finding certain things important. If I were giving a verbal lecture to you instead, you might possibly draw conclusions about my abilities and my state of mind from the way I act. The circumstance that - whether I intend to or not - I always disclose information about myself, is something that I, the transmitter, am well aware of, and that causes me some inner commotion and discomfort. How will I perform as an author? Sure, I want to convey objective information, but I also want to make a good impression, I want to present myself as a person who has something to offer, who knows what he is writing about and who is "on top of things" in terms of ideas and language.

This side of the message is related to many problems of interpersonal communication. In a later chapter, I will describe how the transmitter tries to cope with these problems. How he - in trying to make the best possible impression - uses various techniques of self-aggrandizement and self-concealment - not always to his own best...

Relationship (or: what I think of you and how we stand to each other)

The message further reveals the transmitter's position towards the receiver, what he thinks of him. This often shows in the choice of words, the tone of voice and other non-verbal accompanying signals. The receiver has an especially sensitive ear for this side of the message, because this is where he feels like he, as a person, is treated (or mistreated) in a certain way. In our example, the husband indicates with his remark that he doesn't quite trust his wife to be capable of driving the car satisfactorily without his help. Possibly, his wife may defend herself against his "patronizing" with a harsh answer: "Who's driving the car, you or I?" - remember, in this case, her rejection is not geared towards the objective content (that she will agree with!). Rather, her rejection is directed towards the relationship-information that she received.

Generally speaking: sending out a message always implies expressing a certain kind of relationship to the person addressed. In a strict sense, this is, of course, a special part of the self-disclosure. But we want to treat this relationship-aspect as something different, because the psychological situation of the receiver is a different one: when receiving the self-disclosure, he is a "*diagnostic*" whose own personality isn't involved ("What does your remark tell me about *yourself*?"). When receiving the relationship-side, it - literally - *concerns* him personally.

To be specific, we find two kinds of information on the relationship-side of the message. For one, the kind that reveals what the transmitter thinks of the receiver, how he sees him. In the example, the husband reveals that he believes his wife to be in need of help. - In addition to that, though, the relationship-side also contains information about how the transmitter views *the relationship between himself and the receiver* ("this is how we stand to each other"). When a person asks another person: "Say, how's it going with your marriage?" - then this objective question implicitly carries the relationship-information: "The way we stand to each other allows such (intimate) questions." - Obviously, it is possible that the receiver doesn't agree with this *relationship-definition*, finding the question inappropriate and obtrusive. And so it is not rare for us to see two communication partners involved in a tiresome tug-of-war about the definition of their relationship.

Thus, while the self-disclosure-aspect (from the transmitter's point-of-view) contains *I-messages*, the relationship-aspect contains *you-messages* on the one hand, and *we-messages* on the other hand.

What is going on now, while you are reading this text, on the relationship-side of the message? Just by having written this book, I reveal that I think you need information regarding our subject. I assign to you the role of the student. By reading (and continuing to read) this book, you reveal that you accept such a relationship for the moment. However, it could be that you feel "lectured" inappropriately by my way of developing ideas. That you think to yourself: "Well, it may be quite correct what this guy is writing there (objective aspect of the message), but his overly pedantic, patronizing style sure is annoying!". I myself have experienced that some receivers show an allergic reaction when I present the objective information in an overly comprehensible way; the feeling might be: "He must think I'm stupid, presenting this information in such a simple, idiot-proof manner." You see how even in objective, fact-oriented presentations the relationship-aspect of the message can have an influence on the situation.

Appeal (or: what I want you to do)

Hardly anything is said "just so" - almost all messages are intended to *have some impact* on the receiver. In our example, the appeal may be: "Step on the gas, so we can make the green light!"

Hence, the message also serves to cause the receiver to do, or not to do, to think or to feel certain things. This attempt to have influence can be more or less open or hidden - in the latter case, we talk about manipulation. The manipulating transmitter doesn't shy away from using the other three sides of the message to serve the effect of the appeal as well. In that case, the information on the objective side is one-sided and tendentious. The self-disclosure is intended to have a certain effect on the receiver (i.e. feelings of admiration or goodwill). And also the information on the relationship-side may be dominated by the secret goal of staying on somebody's good side (like through servile behavior or compliments). If the objective-, the self-

disclosure- and the relationship-aspect are geared towards improving the effectiveness of the appeal-aspect, they are being "functionalized" - they don't reflect what is, but instead become means to an end.

The appeal-aspect has to be separated from the relationship-aspect, since the same appeal can be combined with completely different types of relationship-information. In our example, the wife may find the appeal in itself reasonable, but react sensitively to the "patronizing". Or, the other way around: she could find the appeal unreasonable ("I shouldn't go faster than 60!"), but consider it quite all right for her husband to make these kind of suggestions in regards to her driving style.

Evidently, this book, too, contains several appeals. They will become even more apparent in the following chapters. An essential appeal, for example, is this one: in critical (communication-) situations, try to address - or inquire about - the "silent" self-disclosure-, relationship- and appeal-information directly. This way, you can reach "square clarity"!

Having sufficiently described the four aspects of a message, I will now summarize them in the following model:

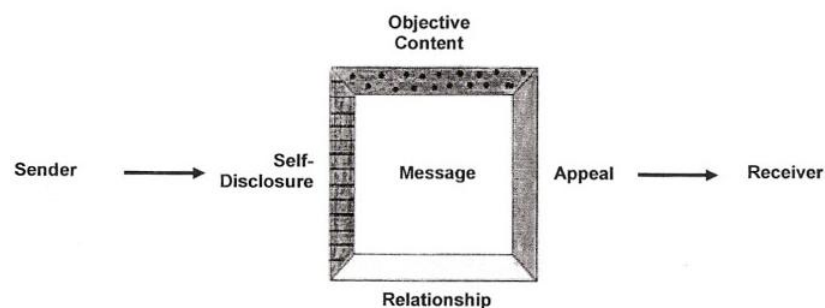


Figure 2: The four sides (aspects) of a message - a psychological model of interpersonal communication

This model is inspired by Buehler (1934) and Watzlawick et al. (1969). Buehler differentiates between "three aspects of language": *presentation* (= objective content), *expression* (= self-disclosure) and *appeal*. Watzlawick differentiates between the *content* and the *relationship* aspect of messages. The "content aspect" is equivalent to the "objective content" of the model presented here. However, Watzlawick has a broader definition of the "relationship aspect" - basically, it includes all three: "self-disclosure", "relationship" (in a stricter sense) and "appeal" - and therefore also the "metacommunicational" part of the message that indicates how it is supposed to be interpreted. The advantage of the model presented here, as I see it, is that it allows us to categorize the multitude of possible communicational errors and problems in a better way, and that it opens up our view for various training goals to improve communication skills.

The Message as Subject of the Communication Diagnosis

Let's keep in mind: one single message contains a variety of information; whether he wants to or not - the transmitter always transmits from all four sides simultaneously. The multitude of information can be organized with the help of the square. This "supplementary information" defines the psychological quality of a message. To elucidate this working method of communication psychology, let's take another look at the passenger's message: "The light is green!" through communication psychology's magnifying glass:



Figure 3: The "information wicker-work" of a message, as seen through the magnifying glass of communication psychology.

Until now, to keep things simple, I have pretended that the "supplementary information" of every message is always clear and obvious. The opposite is the case. As we will see, the transmitted and the received "information wicker-work" can differ substantially.

Messages and Information

I use both terms in the following way: the "message" is the entire multi-sided package with its verbal and non-verbal parts. At the same time, one *message* contains a variety of *information*. By examining the supplemental information through our magnifying glass, the message becomes the subject of the communication diagnosis. - But what is the unit we analyze? Does the message consist of a single sentence, or can it be two or more sentences? Answer: this is not predetermined, it depends on the practical purpose. It could be a single word (i.e. "out!") or a single meaningful look, but it could also be based on an entire speech or a letter.

Explicit and Implicit Information. Information can be *explicitly* or *implicitly* included in the message. Explicit means: formulated openly, outspoken. Implicit means: without being said directly, it is still "in there", or can at least be inferred.

The division explicit/implicit is independent from the divisions of the square: on all four sides of the message, explicit as well as implicit information is possible. Therefore, I can (explicitly) say: "I am from Hamburg!" - or I can (implicitly) give away being a "Hamburger" through my regional dialect. In the same way, I can (explicitly) tell somebody what I think of him, or I can (implicitly) "talk down" on him with a certain tone of voice and certain formulations, showing my stand to him in a no less impressive way. In the same way, I can send out an appeal explicitly ("Erna, go get beer!") or implicitly ("Erna, I'm out of beer!").

One might tend to think that the explicit information is the actual main information, while the implicit information, being less important, is conveyed "on the side". This is definitely not the case. On the contrary - the actual "main" information is oftentimes transmitted implicitly. Some transmitters have truly perfected the art of conveying their concerns through implicit information, in order to be able to deny them afterwards, if necessary ("I didn't say that!").

Non-Verbal Parts of the Message. Oftentimes, the non-verbal channel is used for implicit information: through the voice, through emphasis and pronunciation, through accompanying facial expression and gestures, partly independent and partly "qualifying" information is transmitted. With "qualifying", I mean: the information indicates how the verbal parts of the message should be interpreted. The meaning of a sentence like "You shall suffer for this!" depends crucially on how the non-verbal accompanying signals look or sound. "Non-verbal communication" has recently developed into a significant area of research and (especially for therapeutic communication) an important field of observation.

Can this model be used for purely non-verbal messages as well? Yes. However, in this case, the objective side is usually "empty". Let's assume, somebody is crying. All three remaining sides of this message can contain important information. Self-disclosure: perhaps sadness, mental distress, perhaps happiness - in any case, emotional arousal. Relationship: perhaps a punishment for the receiver ("Now, see what you've done to me, you jerk!"). Appeal: perhaps this crying is a (conscious) strategy for getting attention or protection (see figure 4).

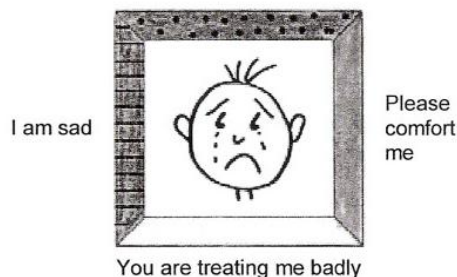


Figure 4: Three sides of a non-verbal message.

"You Cannot Not Communicate". This "basic law" of communication (Watzlawick 1969) reminds us of the communicative character of every behavior. I don't have to say anything to communicate. All silence is communicative and presents itself as a message with at least three aspects.

Let's assume, I enter a train compartment. Someone is sitting in there, and I greet him with a friendly remark.

He doesn't react and continues to read his newspaper. The message that I "hear" is shown under the magnifying glass of communication psychology in figure 5:

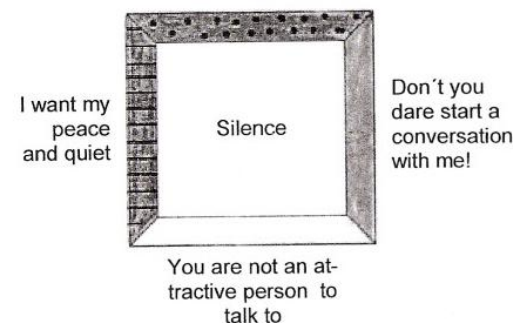


Figure 5: Every behavior has a communicative character. Here: silence in the train compartment.

Every behavior displayed in an interpersonal context has a "square" character and will be received as such.

Congruent and Incongruent Messages

On the one hand, the co-existence of verbal and non-verbal aspects of the message makes it possible for these aspects to complete and support each other. On the other hand, there is the confusing option that they contradict each other.

A message is *congruent* if all signals point in the same direction, if it is harmonious in itself. For example, an angry look and a loud voice go with the sentence: "I don't want to see you ever again, you jerk!"

Recently, communication-psychological literature has paid special attention to those messages that are *incongruent*, where verbal and non-verbal signals don't match, contradict each other. For example, somebody's answer to the question "Is something wrong with you?" might be: "I'm fine!" But his facial expression could indicate clearly that there is indeed something wrong (see figure 6a). - The opposite case is conceivable as well, and occurs frequently (figure 6b).

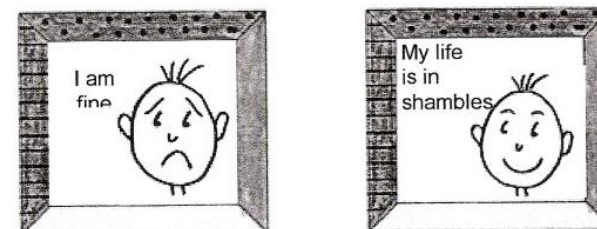


Figure 6: Examples for incongruent messages.

So far, we have experienced interpersonal communication as so very complicated because every message we send consists of a whole "wicker-work of information". Now, things will get even one step more complex: whether intentionally or not, the transmitter always communicates on two levels simultaneously: on the content level and on the meta level. The information on one level alternately "qualifies" the information on the other level. That means, they both indicate how the information on the other level should be interpreted, what it means. People don't just say something, they also qualify what they say.

Receiving with Four Ears

We have looked at the message-square predominantly from the transmitter's point-of-view: he conveys objective information, while at the same time presenting himself; he expresses how he stands to the receiver, who therefore feels he is being treated in some way or another; and he tries to take influence on the other person's way of thinking, feeling, and acting.

Since all four aspects are always involved simultaneously, the communicationally skilled transmitter has to be able to master them all, so to speak. Unilateral mastery creates complications in the communication. For instance, it is of little use to be objectively right, if at the same time, you are causing a disaster on the relationship-side. Equally useless it is to make a good impression on the self-disclosure-side, i.e. by presenting yourself as witty and well-educated, all the while the objective information stays completely incomprehensible.

Let's look at the square from the receiver's point-of-view. Depending on which aspect his listening is focussed on, his reception involves different activities: the objective content, he tries to understand. As soon as he is checking the message for the self-disclosure-aspect, he is acting in a diagnostic manner ("What type of person is this?" or "What is going on with him/her now?"). Personally, he is especially touched by the relationship-aspect ("How does the transmitter stand to me, what does he think of me, who does he think I am, how do I feel treated?"). Finally, the appeal-aspect is evaluated under the question "What does he want from me?", or, in regard to utilizing the information ("What would be the best thing for me to do, now that I know this?").

With his two ears, the receiver is biologically ill-equipped: in fact, he needs "four ears" - one ear for each aspect (see figure 7).

Depending on which of his four ears the receiver has currently switched on for reception, the conversation takes a very different course. Oftentimes, the receiver is completely unaware of the fact that he has switched off some of his ears, thereby changing the course of the interpersonal interactions. In the following, I would like to examine these workings more closely.



Figure 7: the "four-eared receiver"

"Free Choice" for the Receiver

What makes interpersonal communication so complicated is this: Generally, the receiver is free to choose whichever aspect of the message he wants to react to. An every-day-example from a school: the teacher is walking down the hall, bound for the classroom. Eleven-year-old Astrid comes running towards him and says (see figure 8): "Mr. Smith, Susie just tossed her atlas in the corner!"

How does the teacher react? In training classes for teachers, I have observed characteristic differences:

- Some teachers react to the *objective content*: "And did she do that on purpose?" (Acknowledges the objective information and asks for further objective information.)
- Some teachers react to Astrid's *self-disclosure*: "You are pretty upset about that, aren't you, Astrid?" - Or: "Oh, you are a tattletale, aren't you?"
- Other teachers react to the *relationship-aspect*: "Why do you tell me that? I'm not your policeman!" - Or: "I am happy that you have trust in me!"
- Most teachers react to the *appeal*: "I will go and see what's going on right away!"



Figure 8: Astrid and the teacher. Which of the four aspects of the message will the teacher react to? (Drawing by Dagmar Kumbier)

Once more, back to our car-example (see figure 1). "The light is green!", the husband had said. Let's assume, the wife answers, a little annoyed: "Who is driving the car, you or I?" - This would be a relationship-reaction: by this, she is defending herself against the "patronizing" that she senses on the relationship-side of the message.

Nevertheless, she could have reacted to the objective content (i.e. "Yes, it's a string of green lights, that's nice!") or to the self-disclosure (i.e. "You are in a hurry?") or to the appeal (i.e. by stepping on the gas).

This "free choice" of the receiver generates some disturbances - for instance, if the receiver refers to an aspect that the transmitter didn't mean to accentuate. Or, if the receiver is primarily listening with one ear, therefore being (or pretending to be) deaf

for all the other information that is coming in as well. The well-balanced "four-earedness" should be part of the receiver's psychological standard-equipment. Then, it has to be decided from situation to situation which aspect(s) to react to.

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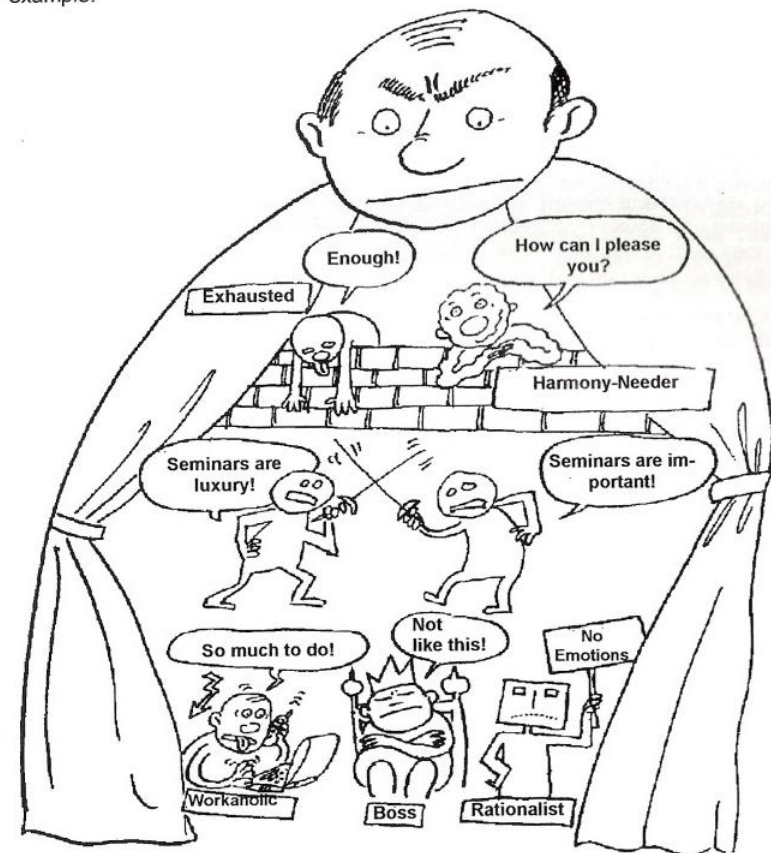
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The "Inner Team": Personal Ideals and Methods of Self Disclosure

Dr. Newman, Senior physician of a large hospital, also heads an outpatient clinic. During a weekly team meeting, one of his employees, Ms. Spice, mentioned that she would be taking part at an important training seminar at the weekend, and would therefore take the day off on Monday. How does Dr. Newman react to this situation?

In most cases, people react with more than just one impulse, one thought, or one feeling. Not only do we find co-operation and conflict between individuals, we also find it within each of us. With this, we can be sure that there is more than one voice that lives within Dr. Newman and influences his decisions.

For example:



(Taken from: Schulz von Thun, F./ Ruppel, J./ Stratmann, R.: Miteinander Reden: Kommunikationspsychologie für Führungskräfte. Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag, 2000.)